

CITY OF NEWARK, NJ'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Mrs. Jessie Johnson

Q: Good morning This is Glen Marie Brickus. I am at the residence of Mrs. Jessie Johnson. And it is now approximately 11:30. Mrs .Johnson, thank you for letting me come to talk to you about the Scott-Krueger Mansion Oral History Project that we are developing in Newark. And we're grateful to you for having agreed to participate in this. So let me just start with some personal information, and ask me to give your name, your date of birth, and your place of birth.

Johnson: I am very happy to have a chance to be a part of this conversation My name is Jessie Lois Jones Johnson. I was born August 18, 1920. Came from a little town in Florida, Meriana, which is west Florida. West of Tallahassee, Florida. I finished high school in Meriana, Florida. Later on I went to college at Florida A&M, Tallahassee, Florida. I spent four years there. After having taught in Douthen, Alabama, for seven months in my particular field which was social studies, I was married. Then I decided to join my husband in Washington, D.C., after seven months. We were in Washington, and jobs were very difficult to obtain. There were menial jobs that you could do, but I didn't have my mind set on doing a menial job. I wanted something in a professional job. And, of course, my husband being a professional man, he could only get a job such as being on the railroad. He was joined the Atlantic Railroad Company, and he ran from Jacksonville, Florida.

Q: Let me kind of stop you there because some of the things that you're covering will be covered in some of the questions that I will ask later.

Johnson: Okay. All right.

Q: You have talked about your occupation when you came from Florida to Washington, D.C. What other work have you done? What did you do next after that first job in Washington? And could you be a little bit more specific about the kind of job that it was in Washington?

Johnson: I never worked in Washington.

Q: I see.

Johnson: I didn't work in Washington. I went to Cleveland, Ohio, trying to obtain a job because my cousin had become the first principal in Cleveland, Ohio at that time. And when I got there, there wasn't much she could do for me because she was only, you know, she just got there really by a thin margin. And she could not say well I will get you on or I'll try to get you on. So we stayed in Cleveland two weeks. And then we headed for Pittsburgh, where they were giving Federal examinations for the ODB, that's building was in Newark. You had a choice. You could take the exam and you could go to, if you passed it, they would send you to Newark, California, New York or Philadelphia.

Q: What was the ODB?

Johnson: Office of Dependent Benefits for soldiers.

Q: I see. Okay.

Johnson: Military people.

Q: And your first job then was what?

Johnson: I was a processor at the ODB and a trainer for new people coming in. Because they used the people with the degrees to help, after the trained us, to help train others which we remained in the same job. And after we trained other people from the Pennsylvania area, they would get to be the supervisors of whatever.

Q: Oh, I see. Are you saying then that the people you trained were basically white folk?

Johnson: The people we trained were basically white folk.

Q: And they moved up while you stayed while we stayed where you were.

Johnson: And they moved up while we stayed where we were.

Q: Was that the very first job you had after graduating from college?

Johnson: No. I taught in Douthen, Alabama, for seven months.

Q: Okay.

Johnson: I taught social studies there in the eleventh grade.

Q: And what was the extent of your education? You graduated from where did you say?

Johnson: Florida A&M University. It was Florida A&M College at that time.

Q: That was, did you go to school any further than that?

Johnson: Yes. I did. I went to Newark State for a master's degree.

Q: Whom did you marry, where and when?

Johnson: I married my husband the year I finished college. And he was from Delray Beach, Florida.

Q: And his name was?

Johnson: Albert N. Johnson.

Q: And when was that?

Johnson: That was in 1943.

Q: What kind of work did Mr. Johnson do?

Johnson: He was a contractor and builder.

Q: Did you have children?

Johnson: I have two children. I have one boy and one girl.

Q: And their names and ages are?

Johnson: Gonophore Johnson. Gonophore is now fifty. And Kenneth is now 49.

Q: Where are they now and what do they do?

Johnson: Kenneth. Both are employed by the Board of Education. One is a music teacher and the other one is in the maintenance, plumbing department. He's a, you know, journeyman, plumber.

Q: Is that the Newark school system where they work now?

Johnson: Newark school. Newark Board of Education.

Q: I see. Okay. What was your father's name and where was he born?

Johnson: My father's name was William B. Jones. He was born in Meriana, Florida.

Q: And what kind of work did he do?

Johnson: My father owned a store, which was a general store, which carry everything. And he was primarily a butcher and he had distinction of having a restaurant that took care of both white and black people. There were only two of them in the State of Florida. One was in Apalachicola and one was in Meriana, Florida.

Q: What was your mother's name and where was she born?

Johnson: My mother's name was Tommie Carter. She was from Douthen, Alabama.

Q: And did you have brothers and sisters?

Johnson: Yeah. My mother was a teacher. My mother finished eighth grade at that time. And at that time, they allowed them to teach according to their abilities. And she started teaching and running summer schools. But she never finished. But in her day she taught. And I had an aunt who was a teacher. She had finished Edward Waters College. And that's, I didn't have too many people anyway. You asked me about my brothers and sisters.

Q: Yes.

Johnson: I was reared as an only child until I was fifteen years old. My mother had one girl and two boys after I was fifteen.

Q: And what was your mother's occupation did you? Oh she taught you said.

Johnson: She taught for a while. Until the laws changed, you know, then you had to go to

college, be in college and all of that. She taught for a while.

Q: Have you at any point in your life for social or any other reason changed your given name or your family name? For instance, like for membership in a religious faith or in a political organization or something like that?

Johnson: No.

Q: If you migrated to Newark, when did you first decide to come to Newark?

Johnson: I really didn't decide. It was, what happened after my husband and I took an exam in Pittsburgh for the Federal jobs. We both passed. And they gave us a ticket to Newark because we didn't have any money. So we took our ticket, and I wired my father, and he sent me some money and had it at the station in Newark. So that's why I came to Newark. Cause I did not want to go to California. It was too far. And I didn't like Philadelphia and I didn't like New York because of what I had seen in Porgy and Bess. So I just stopped in Newark. I did have a good friend here.

Q: Where did you first go, and I think you talked about, where did you first go after leaving your home?

Johnson: I talked about that already. Washington, D.C.

Q: And how long did you stay in Washington?

Johnson: Oh, it was only summer. Because I left for April, May, June, July, and August we left.

Q: Did you know anyone in Newark when you came, when you first came?

Johnson: Yeah. I knew one. I knew quite a number of people because many people had migrated

from Douthen here. And I had an aunt, enough family were here. Like the Whites, George White, Reverend George White.

Q: I think I met him. Presbyterian minister.

Johnson: Presbyterian minister. Well, he was born in Douthen and his aunt was my aunt by marriage. And our first, that's the first people I came to when I got here.

Q: I believe George was on the faculty of Seton Hall when I went there.

Johnson: That's right. Yes.

Q: Did anyone tell you about Newark before you came? If so, who told you about Newark and what did they say and did you have a well-formed image of Newark before you came here?

Johnson: I thought Newark, as people would come back, that leave Douthen, they'd come back. They would come back, and they would come in the biggest car they could come in. And they would come in fur coats. And they would always say, oh, I hope your mother or someone will invite me to dinner so I can have some collard greens or some southern food. And I was wondering to myself, well. I pictured Newark as being a big old country place when they said that. That was the number one thing. And then, and other people had come up and said, I didn't see the fur coats when I was up here and I didn't see the big car. What happened to that? Well, they, I heard that they rented these coats and they rented the car to come down.

Q: To make an impression.

Johnson: And the impression I got from them. They didn't know what they were talking about, you know, about Newark. They were not in the political stream. I know it was no politics at that time too much with negroes. Or they didn't know about it.

Q: How did you come from Philadelphia to Newark when they assigned you to Newark? How did you get?

Johnson: Pittsburgh.

Q: Pittsburgh. How did you?

Johnson: By train.

Q: By train. What was it like traveling by train? Of course, that's a very short journey from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Newark.

Johnson: Newark. It was really nice at that time. Because I was interested in the horseshoe turn on that particular route. Because the train would be in a U formation. You could. If you were in the front of the train, you could look on the other side of the train. That was at one of the points at Pittsburgh. That was very interesting. And Philadelphia was another interesting place just to pass through. All the big buildings. Yet I was told that no building was taller than the statue on the City Hall.

Q: Where did you say you left from when you came to Newark?

Johnson: Pittsburgh.

Q: How long had you stayed in Pittsburgh before you?

Johnson: I did not say in Pittsburgh but two days because we were directed to the YWCA, and you could get a room there for overnight. When we got in Pittsburgh, we were told that we could take this examination. Excuse me. [Interruption for phone call]

Q: Now, Mrs. Johnson, you said when that when you came to Newark, you got a room at the Y?

Johnson: Not to Newark. That was at Pittsburgh. In Pittsburgh, someone, we got off in Pittsburgh. We were roaming, trying to find where we really wanted to settle. So someone said if you go to the Y, they're giving a test for the Federal Government, and they want people. This was during Roosevelt time when he was trying to upgrade black people. Said if you go there and if you pass the exam, they'll send you either four places, wherever you would like to go. Fortunately, we passed, both of us. And they asked us where would we like to go. And our of the four places we chose Newark.

Q: Where did you first live when you came to Newark?

Johnson: 36 Chester Avenue. Now let me tell you something about that. When I came to Newark and we stayed in the Penn Station all night because we didn't know where to go. And the next morning, well, we got in Newark about one o'clock that night, so we just stayed on in Newark. [Aside to speak to someone else] We went down Broad Street. There was a hotel there on Broad Street in Kid 60 building.

Q: Yes. Yes.

Johnson: Down there. And I --

Q: The Essex House Hotel was there.

Johnson: The Essex. So I knew nothing about the north cause I had heard up north we're free, we can do whatever we want to, we are integrated and all. I took my little bag and my husband said, where are you going? I said, this hotel. I got to the hotel and we asked the man about a room. He said, well, I can tell you we don't have rooms here, but you can go on Court Street. Maybe you can find a room. And he said, blacks didn't live there, you know. So that was in 44.

And we left there. Went back to the station and stayed all night. And the man kept prodding us to keep us from going to sleep. The next morning, my husband being an Episcopalian, he felt to call an Episcopal priest. And that's how we got, we called Father Berry. Father Berry was the director of, priest at High Street, St. Phillip's. And he gave us a name to contact. And we contacted the people that he gave us on 36 Chester Avenue. I'm trying to think hard their names now. But they were, they were a group of people who were very fair in complexions. They had lived in the neighborhood. They were from Virginia.

Q: Vaughns were their name. [Interruption for phone call] Now, Mrs. Johnson, we were talking about when you had come to Newark, and you had first met the Vaughns. And let's go from there and see where.

Johnson: Well, the Vaughns were very nice people. They had one daughter at home. Her name was Gloria Vaughn. She was attending Barringer High School. And she and the Dorita Coppitt were very good friends, and I would see much of the two of them all the time as young girls. And I became friendly with the Coppitt family at that time. And as I say, in that neighborhood there were very few black people in that neighborhood. Beyond Chester Avenue, I don't remember any black people too much living that way. Because I was always told the whites were on the other side.

Q: Chester Avenue, is that in north Newark?

Johnson: North Newark, yes.

Q: Okay. After having left Chester Avenue, where did you say?

Johnson: Mrs Field Johnson, who was an aunt by marriage, mother bought a home on Hillside Place, 65 Hillside Place. They had a three-family house there. And, of course, I moved with them and had a room. The room was eight dollars a week and the privilege of cooking. And we stayed

there for about a year and a half, one and a half years. Then the house was owned by whites next to 65 which was 67. I happened to have been out with my daughter and she was in the carriage, sitting out with her. And this old Jewish gentleman came up and said, I've been watching you and your husband, and I like what I see of you. Would you like a house? He said, my daughter wants to move out of this neighborhood. My wife is dead, and I want to sell the house. They want me to, they want to sell it and give it to the first people they want to give it to, and I want to give it the people I want to give it to. So he said, would you like a house? I said, a house. Never had entered my mind at that stage of the game. Here I am with a baby and two babies. And I didn't think we could afford a house. So I wasn't working. Then he said, I'll fix this where you can get it and pay for the house. So when my husband came home, I was afraid to approach the subject just as it was said. So I got my aunt to help approach this matter. And the gentleman said, I'll tell you what I do. I'll let you have this house for five hundred dollars down. We looked at each because we had no five hundred dollars. So he said, but I'll do it this way. I want a thousand dollars down for the house, but whatever you pay after the five hundred dollars, then when you get up to a thousand dollars, I'll give you a contract on the house. We were game enough to take it like that. He gave it to us. He said the house will cost three thousand five hundred. When we went to the lawyer and the daughter of this man came, she said, oh no, you're not going to give it to them for that. They're not paying but five hundred dollars. She said six hundred, five hundred dollars. We didn't care because we needed somewhere to stay, and we were thrilled about getting a house that early in life. So we took the house, 67 Hillside Place. And there again, we were new people in the neighborhood. There were very few people in that part of the, in that section. Because that was the so-called better part of Hillside Avenue, Hillside.

Q: How much time, now Jessie, had elapsed between the time that you got to Newark and the time you bought your house on Hillside Avenue?

Johnson: About two years.

Q: Approximately two years. Did you plan to return to the south after you had come here?

Johnson: No, I did not. Because I came, I left the south because the only jobs you could do were teaching. And there was no future for my husband because he finished in a field that they were not giving black men jobs.

Q: I see. Did you know anybody else who came to Newark around the same time as you did?

Johnson: Yes, I did. I knew my very good friend from college. Cornell Davis. And she finally bought a house shortly after I bought mine. After about five years after I bought mine. Or maybe earlier than that. She bought on, they were selling the houses out in the Wickwake section. I can't think of the street where she ended, but she ended up buying again on Custer Avenue.

Q: Did you know anybody who came from the south and stayed a short while and then went back?

Johnson: Not at that time. Oh some people did leave. But I don't think they went back to the south. Because all of my classmates and friends that left when I did, they're still somewhere around. Up until the last two years. You know, people are migrating back because the conditions have changed.

Q: Right.

Johnson: Politically, socially and economically.

Q: And a lot of people have come and stayed and worked and prepared to. A lot of them bought homes while they were here with the purpose of moving back.

Johnson: Yes.

Q: And they've gotten to be my age now.

Johnson: Yeah. But I think what happened with that, things got so far out of hand up here as far as prices, and they can live better with the whatever. They had a house and they didn't pay but five or six thousand dollars in the beginning. You sell it. The prices went up so they can do much better with it.

Q: Did you ever help anybody else leave the south and come to Newark?

Johnson: Oh yes. Oh, yes I did. Not in a sense. All my brothers, my brothers finished in Tuskegee. My sister went to Tuskegee, then she finished at Newark State. And I helped them. My brother came from, he went to the service and then came from Germany. And he lived here. They didn't live here that long. But my brother was a teacher at Barringer High School in the Science Department for a while. And my sister, of course, finished at Newark State. And she now teaches at Orange elementary school.

Q: How many times have you returned to visit your southern home?

Johnson: When my parents were living, I went every year, from 59 on up to 82.

Q: Do you still consider that to be your home?

Johnson: No. Not really. I consider Newark is my home because that's where my experiences have been.

Q: Well, do you think at this point that you might some day return there to live?

Johnson: No. I have no desire to return home. Although I have property there, but I don't think I'll be returning.

Q: What was your impression of Newark when you first got here?

Johnson: Number One, I thought it was the countriest place I had ever been in my life. Number Two, I thought the people just had, were so low in self-esteem. I thought the schools were very helpful and had much to offer at that time. It was a training point for many people.

Q: So were you disappointed in what you found when you arrived in Newark?

Johnson: Yes I was. The housing, I was disappointed with the housing. You couldn't find anywhere to stay. I was really disappointed.

Q: Now you talked about where you lived when you first came to Newark. What was that housing like?

Johnson: In North Newark?

Q: Yeah.

Johnson: The house was nice. And as I said, nothing but white people were there almost anyway, and so they had a little bit more money and their standards of keeping up things was just a little better at that particular time.

Q: What kind of house, was it a one family, two family?

Johnson: It was a two family house with an attic. And, of course, we had the attic floor.

Q: And you already talked about how much you, how much it cost? Did you tell me how much you paid? No, how much did you?

Johnson: Eight dollars a week.

Q: Eight dollars a week.

Johnson: In both places. When I was at 36, it was eight, and when I moved to 65 Hillside Place, it was eight.

Q: Eight dollars a week. And you and your husband both were working at the time?

Johnson: I wasn't. He was. I had a job until I got pregnant.

Q: And what was the neighborhood like in general? You say that mostly white people lived there. But was it well kept? Were the houses well kept?

Johnson: At 65 Hillside Place.

Q: Either place. Both places.

Johnson: In both places the houses were well kept at that time.

Q: Were there any commercial establishments in the neighborhood?

Johnson: At the end of the block. There was one store run by some Jews. Because at that time you had very few stores. And one was on Chester Avenue. The commercial, most of the stores were on Broadway.

Q: Where did you do shopping and on what basis did you shop where you shopped? Was it because the establishments were owned by African-American people or was it because of necessity that you shopped there?

Johnson: I don't know any places that were owned by black, places at that time. [Interruption for

phone call]

Q: We were talking about where you shopped when you lived, was it Chester Avenue?

Johnson: Chester Avenue was nice. And it was, it was about four black families as I recall. And it was kept up nice. The streets was lined with trees. And people seemed to have, where it seems that the more they were exposed to nice neighborhoods, the better they kept them up.

Q: Where did you do you shopping?

Johnson: Oh, that's what you were asking me. I don't remember any black places so to speak because all the places I knew about, we were, we did our shopping in Newark proper on the Third Ward. And those were Jewish places. Like on Prince Street.

Q: Yes. Yes. That's where you shopped for your food.

Johnson: Yes. Because most times they had one little market on Broadway. And they carried foods that we didn't normally eat. It was more, you couldn't get grits or your couldn't get greens or stuff like that. And since we were, my husband was already working at the ODB. He would just pick up something on Prince Street.

Q: I see. And these stores were owned basically by?

Johnson: By Jewish people.

Q: Jewish people.

Johnson: Or somebody.

Q: How did they treat their African-American customers?

Johnson: They were not very nice. They cheated you on every hand they could. They'd put a chicken up on the --

Q: On the scale.

Johnson: --scale and hold it. That's right. They would do that. They were awfully nice in a nasty sense. I mean, they would say are you from the south and always making remarks. I asked for some rhutabegas, which I had, and he, oh rhutabegas. We don't call them that. You mean yellow turnips. You know, always correcting you in a sense.

Q: And so you really didn't have any alternatives but to go there to shop.

Johnson: No. Finally we learned after moving to Hillside Place, we'd shop on Central Avenue was an A&P store there. But they did not carry meats. On Avon Avenue, you had a little across, it was Avon and Hillside Place, they did not carry meats. So your only alternative was to go to Elizabeth Avenue. They had a big A&P down there on Elizabeth Avenue. And that's where we ended up doing our shopping.

Q: Did any of the merchants that you patronized hire black people?

Johnson: No. I don't remember any of them being black. Cause I know they weren't there. I don't know about Prince Street. But I'm sure they didn't cause they didn't even hire people who had butchering experiences from the south. That's another thing. Like my father had a, he was a butcher and butchered for everybody in the south, white and blacks. But the minute you hit up north.

END SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

Q: Where you shopped, whether or not they hired African-Americans, and you were saying?

Johnson: I would say, no they did not.

Q: And what were saying about Bamberger's?

Johnson: I tried to get a job at Bamberger's as a stock clerk girl. That's the only job that you could have at Bamberger's at that particular time and the elevator operators. Well, that was political sewn up. Because it seems that you had to be a certain color, or you had to be a native of Newark, and they had those jobs. So they told me I had too much education. That was the word going then. You have too much education. You wouldn't be too happy here. I wanted a job. I wasn't looking for them to tell me that. And, of course, someone told me notice in the paper and the migration of the blacks coming from the south. They needed black teachers. That's when I started out.

Q: Did the, did local stores offer you credit? Could you get credit at the stores where you shopped, even at Bamberger's at that time?

Johnson: Yes. You could get credit.

Q: How would you compare your experiences in the south with your new experiences in Newark with respect to the following? When you came to Newark, were you able to purchase dry goods and foods that you were familiar with?

Johnson: Yes.

Q: In what ways, if any, did people in Newark dress differently from people in your southern home?

Johnson: No. Not really.

Q: Everybody wore basically the --

Johnson: Same thing.

Q: -- same kind of clothing.

Johnson: Those who could afford it looked better, and those who couldn't afford it, well, they didn't look so good. But basically it was the same thing as it was in the south.

Q: Did you find relatives and friends that you made here as helpful in Newark as they had been at home?

Johnson: Yes. I did. You know, a very good friend, Margie Horton, Lillian Thomas and a few other people that I met were very good friends.

Q: As you grew up, Jessie, like most of us who grew up in the south, older people in our communities and in our churches, were referred to as aunt such and such or uncle such and such. Or Mr. and Mrs. And when you came to Newark, did you find that to be true still?

Johnson: No. I found people trying to be what they weren't. I was told don't speak to no one. You don't speak to people around here. Then, going to the Episcopal Church, certainly didn't help me. So for a long time I felt people were really, you know, caring mostly about themselves and nobody else. But I didn't go to the right places, I'm sure. Had I gone to a Baptist or Methodist Church it would have, things would have been different.

Q: What about celebrating special events like births in the family or weddings and funeral, etc.? Did you find any difference in the way those things were observed here as opposed to what they

were in the south where you grew up?

Johnson: No. Because when I came, money was a factor. And it was still a factor here and it was a factor down south. How you celebrated something. The people were still, say for instance, you go to a dance downtown, they were taking foods which I had never heard of. That was not a common practice down south. They had punch and cookies or something like that. But they were bringing all kinds of food. The first big meal I ever ate I ate it at a dance downtown. And people brought their foods and their liquors to the dance. That soon faded too.

Q: What about celebration of holidays like Christmas and Easter and Fourth of July and Thanksgiving? Were they celebrated differently or mostly the same?

Johnson: No. Mostly the same.

Q: Mostly family gatherings and friends. What about the use of intoxicants and other substances? Was the use of drugs and alcohol prevalent in Newark more so than in the south or the other way around?

Johnson: I think it was just about equal. I think up north, the blacks felt that they were freer than they were down south because so many penalties were imposed upon people who would get drunk or use drugs. And drugs, I didn't hear about that until recently, recent years.

Q: I see.

Johnson: Only time I ever heard about drugs, I had a teacher from Norway, Sweden. She was black, but she went over there to study. And her excuse for using drugs was that she lived in Norway, Sweden.

Q: Many African-American women who grew, especially those who grew up in the south, had a

habit of eating clay dirt or Argo starch. Did you every know anybody who?

Johnson: Had a what?

Q: A habit of eating clay dirt.

Johnson: That was, I can truthfully say I saw the older people doing that, but I don't know anybody in my generation was eating clay and all that stuff. But I did see older people.

Q: What about starch?

Johnson: Starch. I've seen older people eat that. I really didn't know anybody in my group. Well, I can say, I left home at seventeen so I don't know what was going on.

Q: Right. What about traditional medical practices? How did the use of such as home remedies, patent medicines and midwives in Newark compare with the use of such in the south?

Johnson: Home remedy. Sure. People had to use home remedies, but there were some families did not use home remedies because they were afraid. You know, so many things had happened, and people were beginning to understand science a little better. But most people did use home remedies.

Q: Can you remember any particular home remedies that were used for a particular cause or illness?

Johnson: Yes. I do. I have always suffered with hives. When I was a child of ten years old, my body was covered with hives. My mother took me to the doctor, and they couldn't help me. And then someone told her about some, some kind of tea. And she gave it to me. And the bumps on my body was three times as large as they were before. That was the home remedy for me, and

that was the last time I had any home remedies. She never believed in them anymore after that. But I do know things that people did. But fortunately I was pretty healthy other than hives. And I still have the hives.

Q: Did you know of any, when you first came to Newark, when women had babies, did they go to hospitals or were they born at home, delivered by midwives or?

Johnson: In Newark?

Q: Yeah.

Johnson: When I came here, they were all going to City Hospital.

Q: Okay. Did you know of children being delivered by midwives in the south?

Johnson: Oh yes. My grandmother was a midwife. And that was too was going out of existence in the early 40s.

Q: Jessie, what about, you know, Dee and a lot of people who lived in the south and I would imagine some people who lived here believed in people being able to fix you. You know, like using conjure or voodoo or whodo, whatever they call it. Was that prevalent in the south that you know of, or did you know of anybody?

Johnson: Oh yes. I knew. Because we used to know of people coming from New Orleans, and that's why I could never believe it because they stayed at our home. And they would laugh and talk about how they came to save somebody from being fixed by somebody else. And they would charge them. And believe me there were more white people coming to see them than there were black people. And they made their money like that.

Q: I think I remember some, the seven sisters in New Orleans.

Johnson: That's right. And these were the people from the seven sisters from New Orleans, and they would just laugh about how they were raking in the money. It wasn't that much. I guess fifty cents or a dollar, whatever it was, they had to pay for it.

Q: But if enough people came and paid fifty cents or a dollar, you'd have a.

Johnson: That's right. But that was prevalent. People believed in that.

Q: Did you hear of any such after you came to Newark?

Johnson: Some southern people came up here so they brought their habits and traditions with them. And they still believed in that. I thought I know some people now believe in the same thing.

Q: It's interesting, isn't it?

Johnson: Yes. And they had these tea reading parties which is just a step up from the same thing.

Q: What about pets? As you grew up did you have any pets, or did you like pets or?

Johnson: Oh yes. I had my share of pets. I had a dog.

Q: What about juvenile delinquency or crime? How did that compare where you came from with what you found when you came to Newark?

Johnson: Basically it wasn't too much difference. You didn't have that much going on. I didn't find that much crime and stuff going on when I got here because you could even leave your doors open. You leave your babies outside. And there wasn't that much. And the laws were different,

especially with black people. And they knew if they committed any kind of crime like they would do today, they would be apprehended about it.

Q: Right.

Johnson: And they knew in the south if they did anything, they would be lynched.

Q: What was your perception of blacks helping each other in Newark?

Johnson: I think in the beginning when I came up here, I think that people had very much the spirit that they had in the south. They had to extend a hand to each other.

Q: Right. How would overall relations with whites in Newark compare to relations with whites in the south?

Johnson: Let's put it this way. In the south, the black people had a certain dependency with the whites. And, of course, they had a place. And the whites knew they had a place. But there was no real relationship. I found in coming up north it was a different relationship. It was a financial relationship. Not caring. I don't think the people here in the north cared anything about. But, now I'm not saying they cared anything about you in the south. But you stayed in your place, you could stay down there. That's so many of us left because we didn't feel like we had a place. There at least white man felt, we felt that he was a snake and we knew he would bite. But up here, he could throw you off so many ways. Take your money. Do other things to you.

Q: What major customs and traditions from the south do you recall surviving in Newark, like picnics, cookouts, observance of special holidays, etc.? Did you find any of those things that were prevalent in the south, and you found them continuing when you came to Newark?

Johnson: Yes. Yes. I found them continuing. All of them.

Q: Specifically name a couple that you, if you can remember, what we considered as traditions or traditional African-American experiences in the south that continued here?

Johnson: I found that eating habits, eating in the south. People up here had been exposed to different nationalities and I was told that they were mixed in, like neighborhoods, before they start moving out. So, like a lot of people, cause we had a few cousins up here, and they lived down in, oh let me see, the section where all the black people were thrown in. Back of Elizabeth Avenue. And traditionally they followed the Italians, and they ate a lot of pasta and meatballs or whatever they would be eating. But somehow, or if they were in a Jewish neighborhood, they ate whatever was in that neighborhood. But they always seemed to have a longing to get back to Prince Street to buy the foods that they had been previously eating.

Q: Right. How were you received or treated by African-Americans who lived in Newark for a long time?

Johnson: Fine. Cause all of us were young together at that time. And I didn't know the older, too many older people at that time. So I didn't know the real Newarkers, you know, at that time. All of us probably buying homes up here from the south. With the exception of Margie Horton. This is her home.

Q: Do you know of any part of Newark where black people from a particular part of the south settled together?

Johnson: Yes. I think the people from Florida or from North Carolina, they settled in, at that time you only had the South Ward to settle in. Or do you recall, down on Pennsylvania Avenue, what is that?

Q: That's the East Ward.

Johnson: East Ward. Down in that little section. And a few settled in the Iron Bound, a very few settled in the Iron Bound section, and a very few in the North, North Newark.

Q: So these were mostly people who came from the same place in the south and settled in these various neighborhoods.

Johnson: Yes. Because basically one of their relatives would be there, and they would come to either one of these neighborhoods.

Q: Now tell me again, Jessie, what did you say was your first job when you came to Newark?

Johnson: To Newark. I was working at the Federal Building, which was the Office of Dependent Benefits for. It was to pay the wartime people off. Those soldiers who went overseas, and we're paying their spouses or what not the monies.

Q: How did you get that job?

Johnson: From Pittsburgh by taking that examination.

Q: Okay. And particularly what did you do?

Johnson: I was a processor for payments. And I was also, I wasn't called a supervisor, but I taught in that capacity.

Q: How long did you keep that job?

Johnson: Oh, about seven, eight months.

Q: And how did you regard the job? What did you think of it?

Johnson: I thought it was wonderful when I was there. But then I began to notice everybody I was teaching was moving and I wasn't moving. Now, for instance, my husband was for just a job, and he decided he didn't want to do what he was doing any more. He was in the file clerks, the filing department. And he decided, he wrote papers, wrote to Washington about it, and everything. So they made him head of the filing department.

Q: How far was the job from your home at that time?

Johnson: Oh it was North Newark. It was about, I would say that's about two and a half miles. Right?

Q: And how did you get back and forth to work?

Johnson: I walked.

Q: Really?

Johnson: Cause I didn't have a car. [Laughter]

Q: And there was no bus transportation?

Johnson: It was because I didn't have no money. [Laughter] It wasn't that bad. But it was nothing for us to put our feet in Newark and walk there. Everybody else was doing it. I mean, a lot of people. You weren't walking by yourself.

Q: What were the work conditions like? For instance, like wages and hours and your work week.

Johnson: I think we made thirty-seven fifty for two weeks. That was big money.

Q: And what kind of hours did you work?

Johnson: From 3 to 11 or from 8 to 2, 8 to 3, about five or six hours. We weren't working eight hours.

Q: I see. Were there any other people from your southern home working there? From the south.

Johnson: Oh sure.

Q: From the south in general?

Johnson: Yes. Because those jobs were created to give college people a chance to work also. You know, and anybody had the, mostly people who were working up here had twelfth grade education. Black people. And white people too. And all, if you asked you for a job, they would refer you, a college graduate, they would refer you to the ODB.

Q: Were there any people from your home town or from your area of the south working in?

Johnson: I don't think so. Most of the people in my home town chose Detroit to go to.

Q: How did you get along with the people on the job?

Johnson: Very well.

Q: What were the supervisors like? What was their attitudes?

Johnson: They were pretty good cause they were learning. They were learning. They were good.

Q: Were the supervisors white and most of the workers Afro?

Johnson: No. Most of the workers were white.

Q: I see.

Johnson: But I understand they were high school graduates. And they used those few college people to try to help them along and then they promoted them, but they didn't promote black people in that place. Some people may have. I don't know anybody had a real high job. They could have had it, but I don't know. And then shortly after I was there, they moved to St. Louis. And they asked, they did ask the blacks, if they wanted to move with them. Some of them did, and some of them didn't. We chose not to.

Q: So when that job moved, where did you go to work then?

Johnson: Board of Education.

Q: As a teacher?

Johnson: As a teacher. I was in one of the, you know, the first group of black teachers hired. We had to take the examination, which was a whole day, at Central Avenue School. First I started off, I had the credentials for being a teacher. So, but you could sub if you wanted to. And I started subbing in 48. And then in 50 I took the exam. Cause I was waiting for my children to get four or five years old before starting.

Q: On the job that you had at the ODB was there a union there?

Johnson: I don't know anything about a union at that time. Oh, I was so glad to have a job. I'm sure it wasn't. I don't know. I really don't know.

Q: Now you said after that job moved, you went to work in the Newark school system as a

teacher and you taught there for how long?

Johnson: Forty years.

Q: Forty years.

Johnson: Yes.

Q: And you retired when?

Johnson: 1990.

Q: Okay. Did you ever do any casual or part-time work?

Johnson: No.

Q: Were you ever unemployed?

Johnson: No.

Q: What were the common occupations for black men and women in Newark when you first came here?

Johnson: Working in homes, white homes. And factory work. That was prevalent when I came here. A lot of factories were here. Because see they weren't even, they couldn't even drive buses then. I remember when they fought and got that to do.

Q: Did black people enter into new occupations during your residence in Newark?

Johnson: Yes.

Q: If so, what kind of occupations did they?

Johnson: Well, they allowed them. You know, after the fight in North Carolina about desegregating all jobs, then they started lining up to become clerks in the different stores. They weren't handling their money, but they could become a clerk. And they upgraded them, you know shortly after that.

Q: Right.

Johnson: And I remember Mr. Turner being one of the first councilman. And I'm sure he was hampered by the system of doing things that he wanted to do for the black people.

Q: We're gonna get to that a little later in the. What church do you belong to?

Johnson: I belong to Bethany Baptist now. Only I've been a member there for about fourteen years.

Q: And you belong to, what church did you belong to before you became?

Johnson: Episcopal Church. Trinity in Newark. Trinity Episcopal Church.

Q: I see. Okay. Where is Trinity located?

Johnson: Broad Street. Broad Street right in front of Hanes.

Q: Oh yes. Okay. How active has your religious life been?

Johnson: Very active. I was head of certain organizations in Trinity. I was a musician for St. Phillip's and Trinity. St. Phillips, you know, moved from High Street to Broad Street. It was burned down in the early 60s on High Street.

Q: When did you begin being active in the church?

Johnson: Immediately after I came to Newark. After two years, after I joined St. Phillip's.

Q: What positions did you hold in the church, if any?

Johnson: I was the musician for the children's programs and different things like that. And Trinity also was a musician for different affairs. And I was president of, oh they give a party every year, give a card party every year, and I can't even think of the name of it.

Q: What do you, do you know anything about the history of the church?

Johnson: Of the church?

Q: That was an Episcopal Church.

Johnson: That was an Episcopal church. And as I see it, most of the people in there were of foreign birth. And I felt that they were a very cold group of people. You didn't really get a chance to know them that well.

Q: Did you ever study or learn about the origination of the Episcopal Church?

Johnson: Yes I did. We came in our of Philadelphia, you know, when the two ministers I think it was Reverend Thomas and Reverend. Shortly after they came from England. What is the big Methodist Church name in Philadelphia? The first Methodist Church that was in the United

States. These two men went to church. The white church. And they asked them, they were coming back, and they didn't provide anywhere for them to sit. So they were kneeling down praying, and these two men.

Q: That was a Methodist Church I believe.

Johnson: No That was a --

Q: That was an Episcopal?

Johnson: church from England. Whatever church it was then. They were trying to worship with the white people.

Q: I understand. I remember that story. But I forget.

Johnson: And they were on their knees.

Q: Jessie Allen. Allen, his name was Allen.

Johnson: Yeah. Allen and Reverend Thomas. Well those two men were on their knees praying, and the men tried to hurry them up. And he said, well, we're gonna finish this prayer. And they decided they would get their own group. And then he went out, Allen went out and became the first, organized the first Methodist Church. And the other minister went out had the first Episcopal Church.

Q: Oh, that's interesting. I knew about, I had heard often about Allen in the Methodist Church because I was a Methodist before I came to Bethany.

Johnson: Oh, I see.

Q: And that was a part of our history, our orientation into the Methodist Church. Richard Allen.

Johnson: Richard Allen.

Q: Richard Allen his name was.

Johnson: I have all this, but sometimes I forget all these things.

Q: Do you remember any outstanding ministers in the Episcopal Church? [Interruption for phone] Do you remember any outstanding ministers at all, whether they were black or white or whatever, ministers that you would consider having been outstanding ministers in the church? And why would you consider them to be outstanding?

Johnson: As I said, I was in the Episcopal Church thirty-four years. I thought Father Berry, he had a lot to do. And the attitudes of the people were different, his attitude was different at the time. People who would come up here for St. Phillip's turned out to be a prestigious church. You know, everybody came from the south at that time, they were trying to get away from their basic training, like being a Baptist or Methodist. Then you say, why did you become an Episcopalian. My husband was of foreign background. And he was an Episcopalian. He was born Episcopalian. And he would never go to another church. So that lessened my --

Q: Your options.

Johnson: Yes. And I just, well, he wanted his children brought up in the Episcopal Church. So I knew very little about Newark and their outstanding ministers in the Baptist or Methodist Church. I knew Reverend Mattson from Douthin because my uncle ordained him. So I knew of him, you know. So I thought he was a very good person.

Q: Well, I was referring to ministers in the Episcopal Church.

Johnson: Only person I knew was Father Berry. And then there was Dean Robinson. I thought he was an outstanding person. He was the first dean of the cathedral.

Q: What do you consider to be the most outstanding accomplishments of the Episcopal Church? Aside from Sunday worship.

Johnson: I think the routine of the service gives you a lot to think about. And constantly reading over your duties, what you are supposed to be about in the church.

Q: Did they have any outreach programs where they did missionary work or training lay people to become church leaders and that kind of thing?

Johnson: I really can't say. I didn't work with any of the outreach programs. But they did in the latter years try to start reaching out. They had a clothes closet, you know, helping people. I think the Episcopalians, and up until a few years ago, was just a closed. This is the way I see it. A kind of closed organization.

Q: How much have you participated in social and cultural activities in Newark?

Johnson: Very much. I've been, ever since I've been here. I've always been the pianist for a lot of social activities. Many of them. And also with Maude Johnson.

Q: That name sounds familiar, but.

Johnson: She was. And is now with the YWCA on Jones Street, you know, the Y on Jones Street. I worked for them. And I worked with the, presently.

END SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

Q: Social and cultural organizations. You said you belonged to, did you have membership in any social organizations or cultural organizations?

Johnson: Yes. I have membership in the Florida A&M group. I have membership in Afro-American Life and History by Carter E. Wilson. Also have membership in AKA sorority. Let me see, what other things. In the church, black college committee.

Q: Did you belong to any, what they refer to as secret organizations, such as the Eastern Star, or bridge clubs, or literary societies, choral ensembles, benevolent associations, etc.

Johnson: Belonged to the museum group. I did belong. I don't now.

Q: When did you first join these organizations?

Johnson: I joined in, about say, twenty-five years ago, twenty-five or thirty years. The organizations I just named.

Q: Other then your activities as a pianist or musician, were there any other roles you filled in these, in any of those organizations, like holding office or?

Johnson: Yes. I held presidency in all of them. Each one I named.

Q: Do you know anything?

Johnson: All but the AKA, but I hold an office in it, with the AKA.

Q: Do you know the history of any of those groups? How they began and when and where they began?

Johnson: Yes. I do.

Q: Can you tell me something about any of them?

Johnson: Well, I'll tell you about Florida A&M alumni group. We were a group of students who came from Florida A&M to this part of the country. Most of the people I knew then, we started this organization in New York. And we had people from all different places. At that time, people were beginning to move out of Harlem, and they would move to Flushing, Queens, all those places. And this place where Jackie Robinson lived. I've forgotten the name of it.

Q: Flatbush I believe.

Johnson: Yes. Well, anyway. They moved, a lot of them moved there. And then Jackie Robinson eventually moved out of that neighborhood. But people were getting homes out in the suburban area New York. So we traveled from home to home at that particular time with this group. There were about thirty of us. And I stayed with that. I eventually became president of that group. And I'm still a member of that group. Last year we had a convention at Newark Airport, which was given at the Marriott Hotel, and we had the regional district, people from Boston all the way to Washington, and of course, the President Humphries came from Florida A&M. We also had the honorable congressman Payne as one of our speakers at this group.

Q: What was the mission of the group? What was their purpose?

Johnson: Yes. There was a purpose. We all want to make Florida A&M a vital institution for any student who would like to go there. And upgrade the institution and see that the academic standards are upheld. And try to encourage as many students as we can to go to college. Not necessarily to Florida A&M, but to go to college.

Q: How much have you participated in political activities in Newark?

Johnson: Political activities, I was a committee woman of East Orange and the Fourth Ward about twenty some years ago, twenty years ago. And when I joined this group, I started living in this apartment building, 44 Southmont Avenue. I have just moved from Tremont Avenue and Tremont Court because I had lost my husband and I had no need for the house anymore. It was too large for me, and I was the only one in it. So therefore I moved here. Which this building was off limits to blacks for five or six years until the Federal Government said you must let blacks in. That's when I came in here. There were few of us in this building. But back to the point I was trying to get back.

Q: The political activities.

Johnson: The political activities. So my point was to try to help people to live better in apartments so they wouldn't get the stigma attached that black people don't know how to live in apartments. I have somehow was optimistic enough to think that these people would see that we are trying to do and would stay. But I found out I was wrong about that. Because they do not choose to live where black people live. And this was one of the points that I was trying to carry over. And to make people, to get people to vote. At that time you would ask them about voting. I went around to this apartment, all apartment buildings in this neighborhood, and half of them had not even registered. And when the time come to vote, and I would say, I want you to vote for me. I won two years election. I want you to vote for me and why. And then they would say, I would see them in the building and other buildings, well, you weren't there. Oh, Mrs. Johnson, I'll come when the sixth of November. And then I would never see them come. And not many of them registered.

Q: What political party are you a member of?

Johnson: Democrat.

Q: And what positions, you said you were a ward person.

Johnson: Ward committee woman. I got a certificate or whatever. I have to see what I have myself.

Q: Okay you have been somewhat. Who do you think were the outstanding political leaders at the time when you were a member of the East Orange City Council?

Johnson: Let's see. Mr. Cook. Bill Cook. He was the mayor. And Hart.

Q: William Hart.

Johnson: William Hart. Also when I start working.

Q: What did you think, how effective did you think African-American political leaders were? And can you remember any particular accomplishments of theirs?

Johnson: I think black Americans have been mislead so much, until when the leaders did get in, the main points that should have been stressed were not stressed. Too much of not dealing with the problems that the people had. I don't think the problems were ever dealt with. And I'm not saying that it was their fault, but I don't think they dealt with the problems that should have been dealt with.

Q: What would you attribute their ineffectiveness to? What would you say was the reason that they might have been as ineffective as they were?

Johnson: I think maybe intimidation, or maybe that they're just afraid. This is the first time they had this opportunity to become a political influence, and to keep their distinctions. They had to do what somebody else was telling them to do. Or maybe they felt that way.

Q: Right. How much have you participated in community activities?

Johnson: My community activities have been closely linked with my daughter helping other children to get in colleges. I have worked very closely with her trying to help with the students who did not particularly make good grades or have another avenue of getting in school or making something out of their lives. And my community activities would go back with my job at school as project coordinator. I worked with parents and the community.

Q: What other community organizations or neighborhood groups or civic organizations do you or did you belong to?

Johnson: I don't --

Q: And block associations.

Johnson: -- any specific groups.

Q: Aside from being a consumer of regular goods and services, in what ways did you participate in economic life of the community? Did you ever own or operate a business of any kind?

Johnson: No. I did not. Oh my husband was in real estate. But that wasn't me. I didn't do any of that.

Q: Did you ever purchase any stock in black owned businesses or enterprises?

Johnson: No.

Q: How did you get information on the news and events of the community in those early days when you first came to Newark? Did you read black newspapers? If so, which ones? Or did you listen to black oriented radio?

Johnson: I listened to the radio. I read everything black that I can get my hands on. From the first Ebony, I held the first ever Ebony. I held the Jet and Essence, all the black magazines to keep up to date with what people are doing.

Q: And you still subscribe to those publications and listen to black oriented radio?

Johnson: Yes. Yes I do.

Q: What was the relationship between black Newark and other black communities in New Jersey when you came? For instance, well, at the time that you came to Newark I don't think there was much of a black community in the surrounding townships, etc. I don't think there were that many black folk who lived in East Orange even at that time and Hillside and Maplewood, all those places.

Johnson: And I think people back in that day had the idea that we were up north now, and we are supposed to separate ourselves. I think that's what happened to us down the way. We were so busy trying to integrate that we were segregating at the same time.

Q: Did you know of any other black communities in any of the surrounding towns or municipalities?

Johnson: I knew of some. I used to live, when I was in Hillside Place, Sarah Vaughn used to live right down the hill from me on Avon Avenue. And we had some friends that connected with her. So she lived in Englewood.

Q: Sarah Vaughn?

Johnson: Yes. And we would visit these friends over in Englewood, and they were suburban like. So I found they had a problem cause they had all the black people in one little neighborhood.

They had a problem with their schools. There was a teacher who lived in Montclair. She taught at Morgan State Teachers College. She was the music teacher there. And was the first principal over in Englewood. And they were always discussing the discrepancies that they had. And, of course, you know they have just solved some of them in recent years.

Q: Other than Englewood, did you visit other black communities in other towns?

Johnson: Yes. And there were very few black people. I remember going to Passaic, and it was just like going home in some of those of country places as far as the black people were concerned. Because they all lived beyond the railroad track.

Q: What outstanding blacks did you meet or hear of in Newark? Like politicians or speakers or ministers or entertainers? Did you meet or hear of any of those kinds of persons living in or coming to Newark?

Johnson: Frankly I met more of them down south than I did up here. Because Donald Payne came to Newark when I was teaching at Robert Treet. I thought he was a very outstanding teacher and as well as a friend at that time.

Q: You did not remember any outstanding persons coming to Newark? I can remember when Dr. Martin Luther King came to Newark.

Johnson: Oh you mean like that. Yes. Yes.

Q: And Jessie Jackson I remember.

Johnson: Jessie Jackson. That's recent years. Yes. I saw all those. Jessie Jackson, Dr. King, Julian Bond, and the lady over the women's group from New York.

Q: Dorothy Height.

Johnson: Dorothy Height And many more.

Q: She's the national president of the National Council of Negro Women. What about entertainers in those early days when you first came?

Johnson: Yes. Right. I have pictures made with Irving Turner down at the Drum Wagon. He invited my husband and I and the Coppitts down, Ms. Hattie Coppitt. We were invited down. I want to share that picture. Maybe somebody can have it, you know, put it up in the museum cause it's a, it tells a story.

Q: Okay. What I would like to suggest is that any documentation that you have of your experiences in Newark, if they are pictures and even a copy of this certificate that you have here. Anything that you have that you would like to give to us because hopefully they will establish an area in the museum where these things will be displayed. And when your tapes are available, then there will be a little bio sketch perhaps of you as a person and all of this can be.

Johnson: I also received the first recommendation from Donald Payne to be given when he came into office.

Q: I was asking whether or not you had any documentation of your activities or your experiences, and you were saying to me that you did have a commendation from.

Johnson: From Honorable Donald Payne and the House of Representatives, Friday, November the seventeenth, 1989. And I was the first teacher to receive this.

Q: Very good. So like I said, those kinds of things that you have that you'd be willing to share with us we'd be happy to have.

Johnson: Okay. I will. And I think I have some pictures. You know, when Mr. Queen used to take pictures years ago what was happening in Newark. I have some of those I could share with you too.

Q: He was the photographer for the Afro-American.

Johnson: Afro-American. Yes. Also took pictures of events in Newark.

Q: What do you remember about such public servants as the police, the fire fighters, and social workers, etc.? When you first came to Newark were there any such thing as black policemen or black fire fighters?

Johnson: No. I don't think so. Cause I recalled some of the people who got on after I got here. Now there may have been one or two. I don't know.

Q: Do you remember when you first became aware that there were black policemen or black fire fighters?

Johnson: Yes. But they were after, maybe between the 40s and 50s, in the 50s.

Q: What about social workers?

Johnson: Social workers. When I became aware of that, Newark had social workers, you know, the City of Newark, social workers. I became aware of that around the latter part of the 60s. But we had social workers in school. You're not talking about those. You're talking about.

Q: Well, yeah, social workers whether they were at the city level. Those would work out of the health department and take care of primarily of people who were on public assistance.

Johnson: Well, I knew they had them, but I didn't come in contact with those, but I came in contact with the social workers who were taking care of the school. And it was ever since I was in school, they had a few black social workers in the beginning.

Q: Okay. When you or others in your neighborhood got into trouble, or needed help to solve a problem, to whom did you go?

Johnson: To, especially in Newark, we went to Irving Turner. And he did as much as he possibly could do at that time.

Q: How effective were they, to whomever you turned, how effective were they in helping you with your problems?

Johnson: I think Mr. Turner did just about as much as he could have done, but he was effective in some ways. He put a bridge between the blacks and the whites or whatever problem you had to address at that time.

Q: Do you remember what year it was when Irving was elected as councilman?

Johnson: Let's see. It had to be in the sixties. Cause he died in the sixties. Maybe it was latter part of 58 or something like that. I'm not sure.

Q: How was black Newark perceived in those days when you first came? You talked about the areas where you lived so you didn't have any personal experience in the, what was referred to as the ghettos or the slums of Newark, but do you have any idea how black people in general were perceived in Newark by whites?

Johnson: I think they felt, and from my experiences in school or listening to the teachers talk, I think that they felt that there was no hope for the black community. They felt that here you are

coming up here disturbing us from the south. You have nothing to offer. So often I've heard a few white teachers say, I have nothing to teach. And that's when teaching really went down. I'm not teaching anybody today. And I was subbing around at Miller Street School and different schools, and I think that was the general idea of some of them. Now some people, you always have some people gonna do their work and feel that they have to do it. But when you take a group of people and feel that you have nothing and shatter their dreams and hopes. And almost say you're not going to anything so why bother. I think this was the general attitude of a lot of people.

Q: I see. Now, when you bought your first home, Mrs. Johnson, what kind of people lived in the neighborhood? Was it, were they African-Americans?

Johnson: By the time, that time, I would say mostly all the homes were sold to African-Americans. Were about five were left when I bought my home. And when I bought that home, I was living next to a white family. It was adjoining house. And when I bought that house, they moved out the next two or three months. And then the house across the street was a big three family house. They weren't there long. The McKennas and Vance, Killigrews were in that block.

Q: So as the whites moved out and the blacks moved in, were there all classes of black people who moved into the neighborhood like professionals like yourself and laborers, etc.?

Johnson: Well, they were outstanding people of Newark. Because the Killigrews were. That's all I could hear about the Killigrews, they were outstanding family. The Vance were outstanding. He was a big plumber in the Newark area. And thee was the McKenna family.

Q: These were all blacks?

Johnson: All these were black. They were all people of good character, you know, morally and trying to send their children to school. And the Roundtrees.

Q: Other than white store owners and other whites with a vested economic interest, do you recall any other whites having an interest in the black community?

Johnson: Not really. Not at that time. Only to get whatever they could out of the community. And then when they sold your house, they sold it much more than they would have to a white person. And even we paid exorbitant rents for renting. I mean, the people who were renting the apartments. If apartment went for fifty dollars a month, you'd invariably you were going to pay seventy-five. And not only that, if they had a realtor, black real estate people working for them, they helped in some ways to maintain their jobs by upping the price so the people could get more money. They didn't help the people.

Q: Were there any incidents involving racial discrimination in Newark that you can remember?

Johnson: Yes. Housing. Schooling

Q: But there were no open social conflicts?

Johnson: Social conflicts.

Q: Other than the discrimination in the housing and charging African-Americans more than they would have charged whites?

Johnson: Well, socially. We didn't get a chance to socialize with white people. Black people in the school system, when they came in, they tried. But I have never heard of. Black people came in and they were inviting these people to their homes and their churches and so forth. But it wasn't reciprocated by them at all. Nobody. I've never known them to come out and invite anybody. They invited you to their homes or their church. They invited you and you alone. And as time has passed, they prefer not to come into your neighborhood at all. So it's kind of difficult to socialize with people who haven't been socializing with you. And then the theater became all

black. I remember when I first came here they had the Adams Theater.

Q: Down on Branford Place.

Johnson: And the Branford Theater. And all whites and blacks first started going there together. Finally, there were no white people. It became a black concern. When I came here, the black people did not go downstairs to sit in the lower part, loge. Lena Horne's picture, Stormy Weather, that was the first time they showed it in Newark that black people could go and sit on the first floor. And the restaurants. Most of them were segregated. In fact, they burned one down on Washington Street to keep black people out of.

Q: Was that Grant's?

Johnson: I don't know. I forgot the name.

Q: No that wasn't on Washington Street. That was on West Market Street right there at the corner.

Johnson: No that was on. Oh, I was working at the ODB then. They didn't want us in there so that was burned down. And it's another one that, the one you're talking about.

Q: I have often, there's a question here that makes reference to a "Mayor of Springfield Avenue". And I have not met anyone yet who knew who the Mayor of Springfield Avenue was. So can you tell me?

Johnson: No. I cannot. Mayor of Springfield.

Q: Yeah Mayor of Springfield Avenue.

Johnson: Oh, we had a Mayor of Springfield Avenue.

Q: It was obviously some merchant or some peacekeeper or some person who had some kind of influence with people in Springfield Avenue or some benevolent person. I don't know. I can't imagine who it was because I had never heard it until I began to see this question here. And of all the people I've interviewed so far --

Johnson: Nobody knew.

Q: --nobody knew who the Mayor of Springfield Avenue was. I'll keep asking. Maybe one of these days somebody will know.

Johnson: I think it was a matter of trying to survive so you didn't pay much attention to the political set up.

Q: What do you remember about such persons as, local persons of influence, like William Ashby, who was an early black social worker; Meyer Ellingstein, who was Newark's first Jewish mayor; Prosper Brewer, who was Newark's first black policeman; and Irving Turner, first black elected official? Do you remember any of those?

Johnson: What's the first name you said?

Q: William Ashby. He was the, I believe, the founder of the Newark Essex Urban League.

Johnson: Yes. I heard about him. And we had much much respect for Mr. Ashby. He was very affluent in whatever he believed in.

Q: I remember meeting him once, but he was on in years at the time I met him.

Johnson: That's when I met him too.

Q: What about, do you remember Meyer Ellingstein, he was the first Jewish mayor of Newark?

Johnson: He died. Did his widow take over?

Q: I don't really know. I don't remember him.

Johnson: I think I remember something. But I don't remember what happened during his time.

Q: What about Prosper Brewer who was the first black policeman?

Johnson: Never heard of him.

Q: And you have talked about Irving Turner.

Johnson: Now Irving Turner, yes.

Q: And how effective did you think Irving was as an elected official? Do you think he represented the black community well?

Johnson: He tried. Let's put it like that. He was caught up in the social, what should I say, he was caught up. He had to along with whatever was done.

Q: He had to, as they say, go along to get along.

Johnson: Yes. And so many of our people did that. They didn't have the courage to speak out against it. I guess that the time wasn't right for it. I don't know. Of course, we can't say the time because had we had a time limit, we would never have been out of slavery. But I think. This one

person, you notice they just gave one person chance to be in the political arena and that was Irving Turner. What can he do alone?

Q: What do you remember regarding black institutions like hospitals and hotels or banks?

Johnson: Do I remember?

Q: Yeah. Were there any such things as?

Johnson: Yes. The Community Hospital on Kenney Street. That was the one. And that was headed by the doctor from Montclair.

Q: That wasn't Dr. Chase was it?

Johnson: No. The one that had trouble about his wife they found. What was his name?

END SIDE TWO; TAPE TWO; BEGIN SIDE ONE, TAPE THREE

Q: And how African-American people respond to their responsibilities for educating our children. And I was about to ask you what do you see that we could do that would change the status quo, and when I say we, I mean persons who don't have children in the school system. My two daughters went through the Newark school system, and they are on their own now. They, you know, years they've been out of school. But I think my interest should be as high in the Newark school system now as it was when my children were there. So what do you think we ought to do now as a people, as a community, to improve. Because we understand, all of us who care to look, can see what's happening or not happening the school system. And we ought to feel responsible for it. So, I mean, is that your thinking?

Johnson: Yes. And I think we should talk to our council people of each ward. There's a group, a

community group, a church group. We should have more contact with these councilmen. And just not talk. And now use whereas. We should do something about it. And then we should help these young people and try to bring them back morally, you know, to someplace. Probably it's a very hard thing to do, and you have all forces against you. You have the television which is not helping you at all. And it's getting worse. But if we could combine this with our religious education. And yet I just read in the paper somebody said today that don't bring up religion because they are not. Somebody. And a lot of these young people have no idea about religious education. Now as far as the Sunday School is concerned. They're empty. You know when we were working on that project we found out, we were told that this is not a community church because most people come from other places. But I think we make it a community church. We've got to make it a community church. Work with these children. I just, that's the only way I see it. And we're gonna have to work with the parents too. Because parents have missed so much. There was a time they didn't even want them in the schools. Now you hardly, just like reading and writing, 1896 you whipped me if I had a pencil. 1996 you want me to be just like the other people who have all the opportunities and chances of life. We have to start somewhere. And I think it's going to be up to the lay people. And not to the people who think they have reached. Cause some of us have, we, I don't know these people. You should hear some of the comments that are made. I just talked with a lady the other night. She feels truly that we from the south came up here, and we spoiled everything for them. Not knowing that things were already spoiled for black people all over the country. I don't care where you go.

Q: Since slavery.

Johnson: Since slavery time. Now, see that's her thoughts. And she's told me no longer. We all lived together in Newark. We all lived together. We got along. There was no fighting, no fussing. Of course, it wasn't. Because they didn't allow you to go to college up here. When I came up here, they had about sixty people enrolled. Sure you could always go to graduate school. You could go to graduate school in Columbia University. Why? Because they didn't have graduate schools down south for you, so they got a certain stipend from the south to put you in graduate

school. And you notice everybody came up finished during those years. So they wanted the money. But undergraduate school, that was hard for you to get in. It was hard for you to get in in Newark State. Very hard. And those who got in, they feel that they've accomplished everything. That you were dumb because you couldn't get in. And they don't know the problem. And until they look back and feel that we have a problem and we're going to have to be part of this problem, we're gonna have to be part of this process.

Q: What do you recall regarding Louise Scott? Did you know her?

Johnson: Louise Scott. Yes. I knew her for one simple reason. She had a place of West Kenney Street, and I think it was on West Kenney. I'm not so sure where it was. I forgot it now. But it wasn't too far from Hillside. Well, I had babies and I would send for my niece who was a little younger than I was, she had just finished high school, to come up and spend the summers with me to take care of, to give me some relief with the babies. And she did not want to go to college. So I said, okay, I know a lady here. I want you to talk to her. Because she was interested in beauty culture. And we went to Louise Scott, and she took her in. And she was a very fine lady. And she acted as a mentor, she acted as a mother. She was wonderful with my sister-in-law.

Q: Who was the young, who was this person that you took to Mrs. Scott?

Johnson: Her name was Mildred Johnson. I took her there. She had a beauty school. And she took her in without any hesitation, and the girl finished. Fortunately, she married an ambassador to Nigeria so she didn't have to work at the trade after she married him.

Q: Did you have any other experiences with Mrs. Scott other than taking your?

Johnson: Taking her. And I would meet her and talk to her. We talked quite a bit about children and getting in different schools if they didn't want to go to college, or if they didn't want to, that was a good vocation they could take. You know.

Q: What was the community's perception of Mrs. Scott? Do you have any idea what the community thought of her?

Johnson: I think they really liked her. Because she was a type of person you could talk to.

Q: Did you ever visit her home?

Johnson: No. I never visited her home.

Q: And never visited the mansion on High Street?

Johnson: Yes. I did because they had a lot of musicals there. This group, this professional singers, you know, the black group of men. With, this girl belonged to St. Phillip's Church. She used to be the director. She died about four or five years ago with cancer. She was the music teacher in Orange. She was music director of Orange. And she was very good. And then there was two other ladies who were instrumental with this professional black group of singers. I can't think of it. And they had their concerts there. And there were many more civic organizations used the place after she bought it.

Q: Was it in the main building or?

Johnson: That was in the main in the back. I understand that this was, this Krueger built this building to bring entertainment in for his children, which was a big auditorium. Have you ever been in?

Q: No. I haven't been in. I've been in the front part, in the residential part, but not in the.

Johnson: Front part. This is in the back. After they finished with it and some church groups had their meetings there.

Q: Right. Right.

Johnson: Very nice place.

Q: Really? No, I never went into the auditorium back there.

Johnson: Yeah. They used to have all, a lot of affairs there.

Q: I used to go to, as a matter of fact, my church membership was at Israel Memorial which was right across the street from the Scott Mansion.

Johnson: But it was, didn't she have a church there at that time?

Q: Yes. She did.

Johnson: And I didn't know much about it, after it turned into a church. But these were the early years that she rented it out for concerts and different things.

Q: Do you remember what that area was like on High Street there before, where the mansion is located? Were you ever familiar with the general atmosphere in the community, the people and businesses and people who lived there?

Johnson: Yes. We had two doctor friends on that street. One of them pulled up and he went to California. And he had a beautiful place there on High Street. Hardwood floors and everything you would desire. He rented it out to vocational teachers or whatever. He didn't stay, then he got disgusted because the deterioration started. And that was on the left hand side. On the right hand side, they had another doctor there. He left and went to Philadelphia. I don't recall his name. I can't think of names. And the street was beautiful when they had St. Barnabas Hospital. My children were born at St. Barnabas.

Q: When St. Barnabas was located on High Street there? Yeah, mine were too.

Johnson: Yours were too.

Q: Both of my daughters.

Johnson: It was very nice in that area. And the black people seemed to have stayed on the end of the streets, you know.

Q: Did you know of anyone who worked for any of the families on High Street in that area?

Johnson: Who worked for?

Q: Who worked for. Did you know of any black people who worked for the families who lived in those mansions along High Street, because there were some beautiful homes there. There still are.

Johnson: They were beautiful. But they were white, you know, black you mean.

Q: They were white people living there. But did you know of any black people who worked in those homes?

Johnson: No. I did not. I knew of a black woman having a very nice home on Littleton, right across the street from you. On the corner.

Q: On Littleton Avenue.

Johnson: Do you remember that lady?

Q: There was a Reverend Johnson living in that red brick house on the corner.

Johnson: On the corner, yeah.

Q: Of Littleton and Thirteenth Avenue.

Johnson: And she had black people working for her, a black lady working for her. She was one of the first. I don't know what she was. I really can't tell you what she was, but she lived in that house. She didn't live there long. I don't know whether she had cancer, but in my mind I believe she had cancer.

Q: Did you know anything about the persons who lived in that Scott Mansion before Louise bought it?

Johnson: No. No. I didn't know. See, I think, before she bought it, I didn't think anybody was there. I don't recall anybody.

Q: There probably had been years before anybody had, since anybody had lived there. I don't know if anybody had lived there between the time that the Kruegers lived there and the time she bought it.

Johnson: I don't think so because I think she was the next owner.

Q: Okay. How would you sum up your experiences of living in Newark?

Johnson: I think they were very fruitful, and I wouldn't take anything for having the experience. I enjoyed all, everything I went through with them. I hated to see the deterioration and not be able to do anything about what I thought was going down. But it didn't happen overnight. It was all political. And with other factors.

Q: If you had your life to live over, would you live in Newark?

Johnson: As it was then, yes.

Q: Give reasons why you would live in Newark all over again.

Johnson: I wouldn't want to live in Newark now. I wouldn't want to live in Newark. I think when we lived in Newark, people weren't as evil as they are. Their morals weren't so torn apart. I think otherwise Newark would be a fine place to live in. I have no objections to living in Newark. But I think I would be afraid. No more than I'm out here. I can't say East Orange is any better. But I just happen to know East Orange. And I'd have to go back and adjust myself to the crime and everything. And, of course, we know it has been said that Newark has more crime, you know, than most.

Q: Than most large cities. All right, Mrs. Jones, and that is the end of our interview. And I want to thank you so much for letting me come and impose on your time and to sit and talk with me. And I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Johnson: I hope I shedded some kind of light.

Q: Yeah. I'm sure that this will be a good contribution to the effort to preserve or to maintain and to project to younger people what it was like in those years, the generations before them. And we don't know how long this will be. I would imagine if the museum is successful, then who can tell how far in the future that this information might be available to people who come along after us. And I think it's a very worthwhile, a very interesting project. And I'm glad to be a part of it. And, again, as I said, I thank you so much for having let me come and.

Johnson: I think people were more sincere about trying to uplift themselves years ago, than some of them now. And I think it has to do a lot with the welfare situation. I don't think people came

up here entirely to be on welfare. But when you got in Newark, all you could hear was, you don't have a skill. You had to get money from somewhere. So they had to put you on welfare. We had a welfare worker came out to our school, and she said, welfare's a means of keeping people down. Of course, it destroys your ability to do anything. It's easy to think welfare. Then after putting you on welfare up here, then they said, the husbands can't live in the house. They separated. Then they come back a few years later, black people don't have husbands. How can you have husbands when you run them away?

Q: Yeah. Well, we've gone through some changes in our lives, and I have a very serious concern that we have not done all that we could have done as a people, and we still are not doing all that we could do.

Johnson: That's right. I think if we could just become more serious about our situation. We are not serious enough. You get children in school. It's a play, play, play, play thing with them. You know. And if the teachers are doing well, I'm not knocking the teachers, because they do, some of them do very well to deal with these children today. And plus the fact they tell me you have crack babies in school now, and you have all these demented children, and the teachers don't know what to do with them. It's quite a problem.

Q: Well, we just have to hope that somehow all of our discussing our problems might lead to some solutions at some point. And, again, just let me say thank you and we will see where we go from here.

END OF INTERVIEW